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SUBJECT: THREE MONTHS INTO HER TERM, SAN SALVADOR'S FMLN
MAYOR STRUGGLING

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Little more than three months into her term as Mayor of San Salvador, the FMLN's Violeta Menjivar suffers approval ratings of only 45 percent. A crisis in trash collection has turned many urban streets into foul-smelling and unsanitary garbage dumps. Heavy rains have caused disastrous flooding in many poor central neighborhoods, and although the city's drainage system does not fall within the municipal government's purview, many residents probably blame her office nonetheless. Given the lack of available resources in the face of the capital's massive social and infrastructure problems, Menjivar likely finds little cheer in the challenges that lie ahead. Although Menjivar is seen as a possible FMLN "presidentiable" candidate for the 2009 elections, she, more than any of the potential candidates will have an uphill struggle, since San Salvador is considered an unmanageable city and a dead end for political careers. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) In a poll publicized August 7 in leading daily La Prensa Grafica, only 15.4 percent of respondents offered high approval of Menjivar, while 31.0 percent indicated "some approval". When asked to give her a grade of one to ten, Menjivar received a failing average grade of only 5.9. (Note: Approval ratings for Menjivar's predecessor Mayor Carlos Rivas Zamora never fell so low at any time during his entire term. End note.) Some 73 percent of those polled characterized the capital city as being in a bad state; 70.2 percent said that San Salvador was "headed in the wrong direction", and 72.6 percent cited the disorder in downtown San Salvador as bad or very bad. (Note: Informal street vendors have encroached on city streets to the point that much of the city center is nearly impassable to vehicular traffic; previous efforts to move them have resulted in violent street riots. End note.)

13. (C) One of Menjivar's thorniest problems has been municipal garbage collection. The new mayor inherited a fleet of garbage trucks in poor condition; only approximately 10 of 30 remained operable, and nearly two-thirds are more than 25 years old. Menjivar's predecessor Mayor Rivas Zamora had leased garbage trucks from a private company, and was working on opening bids for 15 new trucks when his term ended May 1. However, on entering office, Menjivar decided to stop leasing trucks and instead purchase 15 new trucks immediately. Declaring a state of emergency due to recent flooding, Menjivar on June 16 requested bids from only five companies, and on July 4 announced that she would purchase 20 new trucks from the People's Republic of China at a cost of USD 1,058,400, citing a Chinese company as the only firm capable of fulfilling the city's procurement requirements. In recent weeks, Menjivar has been forced to return to leasing some trucks, and the Saca administration's Ministry of Public Works has also assisted in providing vehicles to ease the crisis. Menjivar has been heavily criticized both

for the lack of transparency in the procurement process, and for delays in the new trucks' arrival.

¶4. (C) The country's May-October rainy season has witnessed several unusually-heavy storms this summer. Low-lying neighborhoods in the metropolitan area's more central districts have experienced frequent destructive floods in which many poor families lost everything. Most storm sewers and other drainage infrastructure are the responsibility of either the National Waterworks and Sewers Administration (ANDA) or the Ministry of Public Works (MOP), but in the face of continued severe flooding, many of San Salvador's more marginally-literate residents undoubtedly blame the Mayor for their travails. In the "El Mundo" daily's August 9 editorial cartoon, a smiling and cheerful Mayor Menjivar is shown being swept away in the flood along with everyone and everything else, while happily opining that, "At least those drains aren't my responsibility!".

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Prior to the March 12 elections in which ARENA's lackluster candidate Rodrigo Samayoa was narrowly edged out by Menjivar (who was finally declared victor by fewer than 50 votes), many political observers privately speculated whether the prestige of ruling the nation's capital was worth the headaches it would inevitably entail, given San Salvador's grinding poverty, overpopulation, violent crime, and crumbling, inadequate infrastructure. By now, Mayor Menjivar must certainly have asked herself if the grand prize of city hall is all that the FMLM leadership envisioned. Menjivar's name is often mentioned as a possible 2009 FMLN presidential candidate, but if she cannot find a way to more effectively address the capital's near-unsolvable problems, she may find, as did former FMLN mayors Hector Silva and Carlos Rivas Zamora before her, that trying to govern a nearly-ungovernable city is a sure fire way to end a

political career.
Barclay